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Book section

FORM AND POWER IN AN AGE OF CONTINUOUS SPECTACLE

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Introduction

There was a time when it was impossible to say anything substantive in media research without launching into an exhaustive discussion on Althusser or Lacan. That time of compulsory theorizing is over, to the relief of many, but that does not mean media research's relationship to theory is now healthy. On the contrary, contemporary media research tends either to operate in a theory-free zone or in isolated capsules of theory-saturation – Deleuzian, Manovichian, and so on - unconnected either to each other or to any wider space of debate. To change metaphors, we lurched in the late 1990s from an all-night party of theoretical excess to find ourselves at dawn in a 'post-theory' desert where even the effort of asking <u>why</u> we need theory, and <u>how</u> we might compare the relative merits of competing theories, seemed beyond us.

Luckily this book's editors are determined to prod us back into alertness. The stakes - both for media research and for wider social theory – are high, indeed they have rarely been higher. It matters what counts as 'good' media theory in an era when media logics are ever more closely embedded in the everyday stuff of politics and when everyday politics seems ever more closely dependent on the strategic use of spectacle by many actors (not only states) in a global sphere of conflict whose instabilities threaten us all.

The point, however, is not to construct large-scale theoretical systems in Parsonian style or to conjure up totalities and treat them as if they were real as in Hardt and Negri's provocative but ultimately unhelpful work on 'Empire' (Hardt and Negri 2001). As Pierre Bourdieu and Stuart Hall have both argued,[1] theory is only useful if through its relative generality it enables us to engage better with the particular, that is, for better tools with which to practise our <u>suspicion towards</u> totalizing claims, whether by academics, politicians, or media executives. It is here – in our choice of theoretical tools – that some difficult choices must be made, when we consider the entanglement of today's media forms with power.

The main choice I want to discuss is between Actor Network Theory and ritual analyses of media, using Foucault's account of 'the order of discourse', briefly, as a bridge between them. Actor Network Theory - and the 'associology' that has recently emerged from it - for all its potential insight into media processes, lacks, I will argue, an interest in questions of social and media form, and so fails to deliver on Dorothy Smith's ambition (1987: 8-9) for a sociology that 'will look back and talk back' to the determinants of everyday life.

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[1] Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), Hall (1996)

My point will be not to defend my own theory of media's ritual dimensions in detail – for this readers can look at my previous work (Couldry 2003a) – but to defend the type of theoretical choice it represents in answer to our ask of understanding media power. At this 'meta-theoretical' level, I want also to make more explicit some philosophical underpinnings of the antipathy towards certain rhetorics of 'the social' that runs through my work on media rituals. That will lead me back to broader social theory, and to three forms of skepticism about the notion of 'society' – those of Latour and Laclau and the skepticism I find, against the grain, in the critical realism of Roy Bhaskar. I will argue for preferring the third over the first two. In conclusion, I recall the global political context in which our choices about theory come to matter.

Let me say a word about the word 'spectacle' in my title. I use it to refer to those things which in contemporary societies we are encouraged to view in large numbers and in viewing participate in an act of representative significance. Every era has had its distinctive spectacles but modern media make a decisive break in the history of spectacle (Thompson 1995: 134): whereas the spectacle of the old royal courts was 'representative' only by virtue of the high status of its performers and immediate audience, the representativeness of contemporary spectacle is inseparable from its dissemination to large and distant media audiences. 'Continuous spectacle' in my title points to the intertextual and temporal intensity by which contemporary media spectacle creates, or appears to create, a 'media world' for our attention. This is not to deny Nicholas Mirzoeff's point that we also live in an age of 'anti-spectacle' which on painful topics such as war and prisons 'dictates that there is nothing to see, and that instead one must keep moving, keep circulating and keep consuming' (Mirzoeff 2005: 16). We can however restate Mirzoeff's point by adapting Jonathan Crary's terminology (Crary 1999): along with new 'regimes of attention' come new 'regimes of inattention', the relations between the two being important. None of this contradicts the more basic point that media contribute crucially to power in an age of continuous spectacle; indeed, the structured relations between regimes of attention/ inattention suggest that, from our involvements with spectacle, emerge social forms of considerable significance. I will return to this point when I discuss ritual, but first I want to look at things from a very different angle, that of networks.

The Limits of Actor Network Theory

My question is simple: how best to theorize – make broader causal, not incidental, sense of – how media act in and on the world. There are, of course, media specialists interested in media texts for their own sake but that approach is oriented by very different epistemological concerns. We are discussing here only media research for which social theory is at least in principle salient. Approaches to media formed within the paradigm of literary criticism are not relevant.

I begin with Actor Network Theory, partly because it was important to me when I was starting down the path of media theory in the mid 1990s. At the time I just couldn't see how the classic elements of media research - the study of media texts, media institutions and the interpretations we make of those texts (vital though they all are) - could together

be enough to explain the place of media in contemporary societies. We had also surely to confront the question of <u>belief</u>. Media institutions have as their main asset symbolic power: a concentration of symbolic resources – crudely the power to tell and circulate stories about the world – that is historically unprecedented. But that symbolic power, however much its infrastructure depends on concentrations of economic and/or state power, is not reducible to them. It is sustained in part through belief, through legitimacy. How can that legitimacy be reproduced except through a stretched-out process, that encompasses not just ceremonial moments but the full expanse of daily life? That was the starting-point of *The Place of Media Power* (Couldry 2000).

And, although I drew on various inspirations – the late Roger Silverstone's (1981) work on myth and television, Stuart Hall's (1973, 1977) early work on media – there was one essay which freed things up for me more than any other: Michel Callon and Bruno Latour's 'Unscrewing the Big Leviathan' (1980). There they showed that we can understand a particular node of power – and so the salience of the general accounts of the world made through it – not by imagining that node's power to be literally 'big' (which would be simply to repeat its own rhetoric), but by tracing all the local linkages that together, over time and under particular conditions, have generated the site from which such claims can circulate on a large scale. Scale, Callon and Latour say, is not a natural property of social space, but something produced by particular actors (using 'actors', of course, in the broad sense characteristic of ANT to include non-human actors).

Callon and Latour weren't thinking of media directly back in 1980, but that does not diminish the relevance of their insights for understanding media's symbolic power. How <u>better</u> to grasp the emergence in the 20th century of legitimate media institutions which derive such broad authority to represent the world from very particular and local processes of production and decision-making? Callon and Latour's tracking of how certain 'obligatory passing points', as they put it (1980: 287), become 'black-boxed' opened up for me a new de-mystified way of thinking about media power.

This is just the first of Actor Network Theory's many advantages for media research. New research on the local television newsroom (Hemmingway 2007), online poker (Austrin and Farnsworth 2006) and the treatment of audience participants in game shows such as *Blind Date* (Teurlings 2004) is opening up important insights by building on ANT's interrogation of how networks are built, and how claims about the world come to be 'hard-wired' into everyday practice. Rather than discuss that new work, I want (schematically) to make some more general points about ANT's usefulness for media research.

First, ANT's general suspicion towards 'the social' encourages us to be equally suspicious about media institutions' claims to represent, or be proxy for, 'the social': more on this later. Second, Latour's analysis of networks' relation to the territories they cover captures beautifully why the complex issues of representation raised by media are always more than 'textual'. For, as Latour puts it in *We Have Never Been Modern*, talking about technological networks generally: '[they] are nets thrown over spaces, and retain only a few scattered elements of those spaces. They are connected lines, not

surfaces' (1993: 118). So media texts, though they often seem to 'cover' a territory in their claims, retain only 'a few scattered elements' of the space they represent: this insight is fundamental for challenging functionalist claims about how media texts relate to 'society'. **The idea that media make selections is of course familiar (as in theories of agenda-setting or framing) but the misleading relationship between the <u>apparent completeness or saturation</u> of media discourse and the objects and worlds which media describes or shows, is perfectly expressed by Latour's aphorism: media discourse crowds out the more particular perspectives from which its totalizing nature can be grasped for what it is, just as a net appears to 'cover' completely the territory over which it is stretched.** Third, ANT highlights the asymmetries of representation built into networks, and the difficulty of uncovering and renegotiating those asymmetries. As Latour and Woolgar put it in *Laboratory Life*, 'the result of the construction of a fact is that it appears unconstructed <u>by anyone'</u> (1979: 240, added emphasis). This remains a vital insight into the role of constructions in daily life, even if Latour sharply distinguishes it from social constructionism (Latour 2005: 90-91): luckily we do not need to pursue that point here.

In all these ways, Actor Network Theory is a very useful tool for thinking about 'the fundamental a-symmetry between shapers of events and consumers of events' (Hall 1973: 11) – an asymmetry of symbolic power that media do not so much create (it has long historical roots), as deepen, entrench, naturalise. ANT helps us think about how particular asymmetries come into existence, and how they come to <u>remain</u> legitimate and (relatively) unchallenged. ANT is equally useful for thinking about how <u>new spaces</u> of mediated storytelling are being generated, perhaps hardwired into, everyday practice because of the networks of circulation and attention on which they rely: ANT accounts for such spaces in a way that does <u>not</u> presuppose media's everyday workings merge seamlessly into 'the social'. If ever new phenomena needed Actor Network Theory to demystify claims about 'social' impact made on its behalf, it is *MySpace* and *Facebook*.

But like any set of tools, ANT has limitations. First, while it shares with Bourdieu an intense skepticism towards generalised notions of social space, it is less able than Bourdieu to map out the <u>stable</u> if complex relations between the relatively autonomous spaces of material and discursive production that Bourdieu calls 'fields': see Couldry (2003b) for detail. Second, while ANT may help us in thinking about how new practices emerge in the newsroom, or new mediated spaces online acquire the features of a 'territory', ANT is less equipped, by its very interests and preferences, to help us understand the consequences of the <u>representations</u> that media generate – how they work, and are put into everyday use. The latter problem might seem trivial, given how much we have already learned from ANT, but it is of fundamental importance. This becomes clear when we consider Latour's recent highly rhetorical defence of ANT in *Reassembling the Social* (2005). Latour is more insistent here than elsewhere that ANT is a complete new way of doing sociology (a 'sociology of associations' or 'associology') which in some ways replaces the old 'sociology of "the social"' – at least in relation to the more interesting things going on in the world. Latour concedes old-style sociology might still be able to make sense of the boring stuff, comparing it to physics before relativity theory! The problem with these grander claims is that they conflict with ANT's radically reduced

ontology. In ANT, there are things, persons conceived rather like things, and associations - that's it! ANT looks, very acutely, at how associations are formed between persons and things (and, at a basic level, sustained) but has little or nothing to say about how actors interpret or think about the persistence of such associations and the institutions which result, or how actors reflect on their mutual relationships with each other and the wider space of networks.

The result is that, when Latour <u>does</u> come to deal with interpretations in one sense –the totalizing interpretations of the social world he calls 'panoramas' (some are theoretical like Bourdieu's field theory, but he also means the claims of media, politicians, and so on) - he has little substantial to say about them (2005: 183-189). He points out, following ANT's usual argument, that such totalizing claims about the world are only <u>local</u> constructions - we need, in media research, to hold onto ANT's radicalism here - but offers no way of sorting out good totalizing constructions from bad ones, a vital task we might think in an age of continuous media spectacle. 'Panoramas' for Latour are all in one sense wrong (because totalizing), but all in another sense potentially positive since they contribute, he says, to our possibilities of thinking on a general level about the world. It is here, <u>unwittingly</u> (since the book's conclusion shows Latour wants to guard against this charge), that ANT's political conservatism is revealed. Let me quote one passage at length:

> [panoramas'] role may become central since they allow spectators, listeners and readers to be equipped with a desire for wholeness and centrality. It is from these powerful stories that we get our metaphors for what "binds us together", the passions we are supposed to share, the general outline of society's architecture, the master narratives with which we are disciplined . . . so no matter how much they trick us, [these panoramas] prepare us for the political task ahead (2005: 189).

What 'political task' is this? The end of the book reveals it to be nothing more specific than living better together and keeping our eyes open for associations in and between unexpected places. This is fortunate since, as Latour's discussion of panoramas reveals, ANT has no tools to help us to separate good representations of 'society' or 'world order' from bad ones, no tools to grasp how certain representations and claims about our world have a particular rhetorical and emotional hold on us. Why not? Because ANT is a theory of associations, not a theory of representation. **ANT is therefore agnostic on many of the key issues raised by contemporary media but by default, a disabling political quietism that is not less frustrating for being built 'from below' rather than imposed (like Niklas Luhmann's) from above.[2]** The consequence is immediate: since media are practices of representation, ANT <u>cannot</u> even in principle offer a complete account of what media do in the world. ANT cannot ground a full sociology of media, however useful and illuminating its 'associology'. While Latour may not care about this, we as media researchers must.

Are There Alternatives?

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[2] (Luhmann 1999)**.**

Luckily, there are alternative paths for using social theory in media research not constrained by the self-imposed limits of 'associology'. I will spend most of this section reflecting on what is at stake in the 'ritual' approach to media developed in my work and others'.

Foucault

First however it is worth recalling briefly the Foucauldian roots of Actor Network Theory, which have been neglected as a resource for thinking about media. Foucault is important, because he takes us back to the properties of discourse - not ignoring its material base in associations and interactions with objects, but in an analysis not <u>restricted</u> to the mere fact of those associations. Foucault was not, any more than Callon and Latour, focusing on media, but in 'The Order of Discourse' - his 1970 inaugural lecture at the Collège de France (1980) – he discusses some very general 'procedures' which 'permit the control of discourse'.

It is a matter of building on the principles Foucault establishes. He talks, for example, of the 'rarefaction of speaking subjects' (1980: 61). Some forms of this principle are less common (the intense ritualisation of certain speech settings, certain restricted 'societies of discourse'). But Foucault argues that, even in an apparent era of open discourse, there are hidden restrictions built into discourse's institutionalisation. In one sense Foucault's insights have already been adopted by a whole generation of discourse analysis (for example Fairclough 1995) but there is still something exhilarating in Foucault's insistence on a <u>materialist</u> analysis of discourse, that undercuts the rhetoric of discourses themselves and explores the constraints built into various media discourses. By the rarefaction of speaking subjects, Foucault makes clear he means not just the literal exclusion of particular people from speaking but also 'the gestures, behaviour, circumstances, and the whole set of signs which must accompany discourse' (1980: 62). There is more than enough here to provide a provocative starting-point for analyzing the gestural universe of celebrity culture.

And crucially (unlike ANT) Foucault develops his materialism into a close attention to the patterns of discourse itself. 'Discourse analysis understood like this' he writes 'does not reveal the universality of a meaning, but brings to light the action of <u>imposed scarcity</u>' (1980: 73, added emphasis): that is, the scarcities, or limiting rules, that structure the surface of discourse. **Such scarcity, working at the level of the categories and exclusions from which a universalizing discourse is built, can be uncovered not be a generous reading of the text, but only by an investigation of its conditions of possibility.** What better advice for deconstructing the mediated rhetorics of nation, society, community, 'the free world', and so on?

Ritual analysis

Having briefly recalled how much (contra ANT) we can learn about power's workings within discourse, I want to return to the question of social form raised earlier via work on media's ritual dimensions which draws on Durkheim's account of the social origins of

religion. This move might seem paradoxical in this context, since Latour at least makes it very clear that the sociological tradition he wants to get distance from is precisely the Durkheimian (2005: 8-9). Latour however ignores the cost of this move, which is to put to one side the belief questions that media raise, and their links to the legitimacy of media power. Ritual analysis enables us to explore the cultural 'thickenings' (Löfgren 2001) around media that are so important to its authority – 'thickenings' that ANT, as a theory of association, not representation, is less well-placed to grasp.

It is important to emphasise right away that ritual analysis is quite different from old-style ideological analysis, for it is precisely the simple notion of 'belief' implicit in classic Marxist ideological analysis (statements explicitly believed by people, yet false) that a notion of ritual practice moves beyond. Rituals work not through the articulation, even implicitly, of beliefs, but through the organization and formalization of behaviour that, by encoding categories of thought, naturalises them. As Philip Elliott put it: 'to treat ritual performance as simply standing for political paradigms is to oversimplify it. [Ritual performance] also expresses and symbolizes social relationships and so, quite literally, mystifies them' (1982: 168). While this might sound like classic 1980s ideological deconstruction, Elliott here turns back from complete reliance on Steven Lukes' (1975) deconstruction of political ritual as pure ideology and acknowledges the force of Durkheim's theory of how social order is maintained through the embodiments of ritual practice. As Elliott and many other writers from Dayan and Katz to Michel Maffesoli have argued, there remains something very suggestive about Durkheim's account of totemic ceremonies for understanding contemporary political and media rhetoric. It is not a question here of relying on the historical accuracy of Durkheim's (1995) account of totemic ritual, or of accepting his claims about the origins of religion. The interest today of Durkheim's work lies in seeing how his proto-structuralist analysis of 'sacred' and 'profane' captures a generalisable pattern which links (1) those moments when we are, or appear to be, addressed as a collectivity and (2) certain categories of thought which have an organizing force in everyday action. It is in this limited – but I hope precise – sense that I have borrowed from Durkheim to build a theory of the ritual dimensions of media (Couldry 2003a).

From this perspective, Durkheim can still teach us a lot about how to interpret the generalized claims that media make about the social world. But from that recognition we can head off in two very different directions. The first route (the 'neo-Durkheimian') argues that contemporary media reinstitute, through electronic means, the unity of the totemic ceremony (for example, Dayan and Katz (1992)). The second approach - more compatible perhaps with today's greater skepticism towards totalizing rhetorics of 'the social' - uses Durkheim merely as an entry-point to a practice of deconstruction. Accepting that Durkheim draws our attention to the constructions encoded in ritual - the claim of media to invoke social order, to stand in for, and give us privileged access to, a social totality - this second approach aims to dismantle those constructions, drawing on anthropological insights about the organizing role of ritual categories, the normative force of ritual boundaries and the expressive resonance of ritual practice, while rejecting any assumption that ritual really is the basis of social order. Indeed, this second approach rejects the very notion of 'social order' as a normative or necessary category, while

examining more closely the naturalisation of certain claims to social order in contemporary societies. The second approach is distinct both from ANT and from neo-Durkheimian functionalism: acknowledging (unlike ANT) those media representations which mobilize large emotion and encode large claims about 'the social' through their organization and <u>formal</u> patterning but on the other hand (<u>like</u> ANT) refusing to take such media forms at face value and always remembering the material asymmetries which make them possible. Sensitized to the potency of ritual form by Durkheim but inspired by a deconstructive spirit closer to Foucault, Bourdieu or Laclau, this approach to media power looks to media rituals' formal details as important sites where contemporary power is encoded and naturalized. As Maurice Bloch once put it, ritual <u>is</u> 'the use of form for power' (1989: 45).

Because it focuses on details of form, ritual analysis done properly (that is, with a substantive rather than purely nominal concept of ritual action)[3] gives us the tools to trace patterns not just in media discourse but also <u>in everyday actions oriented towards media</u>. It is vital to explore the linkages between the 'special moments' of media rituals (the final night of *Big Brother* or a person's entry onto the stage of *Jerry Springer*) and the wider hinterland of practice Catherine Bell (1992) calls 'ritualis<u>ation</u>' (for example, practices as banal as flicking through a celebrity magazine while you wait to get your hair cut). There are many terms in play in media ritualisation: not just celebrity, but the constructed categories of 'media'/'ordinary' people, things, places, times (and so on), and the category of 'liveness' (which indirectly affirms the priority of direct connection though media to social 'reality'). This approach is <u>not</u> motivated by a special interest in ritual or ceremony per se –there is no claim here that media rituals are emergent forms of secular religion! - but instead by a concern with the ways in which certain <u>claims of/to social order</u> (Wrong 1994) are naturalized in discourse and action. The subtle effectiveness of media power – the extraordinary fact that extreme concentrations of symbolic resources in particular institutions have remained legitimate for so long – requires theoretical tools of some subtlety for its analysis. Ritual, and just as important ritualization, are just two of those tools.

More broadly, ritual analysis provides an account of what Bourdieu called 'the <u>production</u> of belief' that links us back into the local and detailed processes from which even the largest and grandest mappings of the social world derive (remember ANT), while drawing us outwards to explain the representations and formalizations on which much political and cultural staging relies. Consider the Live 8 concerts in early July 2005. In those events quasi-political actors (current and ex-music stars) orchestrated a process in which citizens could plausibly <u>act out</u> participation in political decision-making – something very different from the political spectacle Murray Edelman deconstructed two decades ago (1988) as ideological rhetoric performed at a distance from audiences. The more participative Live8 events bring out **how** <u>ritual</u> analysis - an attention to 'subjunctive' or 'as if' language **that is drawn upon, however elliptically, in action – can supplement** ideological analysis **(important thought the latter remains of course in uncovering the explicit discursive contradictions around such events)**. Only the

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[3] Not all uses of the term ritual are helpful. For an unhelpful usage, see Cottle (2006) on 'mediatized rituals, and the response in Couldry and Rothenbuhler (2007).

former can explain how some of the Live 8 marchers (as quoted by media) saw themselves as being 'part of the message' given to governments and as a means to 'force' change in the very same political establishment that (in the UK at least) had already endorsed the spectacle in which they acted! We return here to the dialectic between attention and inattention that I noted earlier.

At this point, given our wider aim of explaining social theory's role in media analysis, it is worth reflecting on what the theoretical term 'ritual' adds to the descriptive term spectacle. This emerges in my one small disagreement with Doug Kellner's excellent and courageous book *Media Spectacles*. Early on in the book, when introducing his topic, Kellner writes that 'media spectacles are those phenomena of media culture that embody contemporary society's basic values, serve to initiate individuals into its way of life' (2003: 2, added emphasis). But is this true? What are these ideals and values Kellner talks about and where is the evidence they are so simply accepted and internalized by those outside media industries? This is clearly a rhetorical concession by Kellner, but why concede even this much? This small point limits Kellner's critique of contemporary spectacles: since Kellner's argument starts by taking the normative force of spectacles for granted, the only possibility for political resistance in our era must be forms of counter-spectacle. But I would want to go further and acknowledge forms of resistance that question the basic principles and preconditions of media spectacle, and the inequalities and totalizing rhetorics on which that production is based. But to do this, we need a more detailed theorization of how exactly spectacle works to encode categories of thought and action: in other words, a theory of media rituals - not for our own edification, but to deconstruct more fully both the contents and the form of media's claims to represent the 'truth' of populations.

Some Right and Wrong Ways to Deconstruct 'Society'

I have argued that if we take media representations seriously, we need also to address the social forms constituted by and focused on those representations. Analyzing media rituals and ritualization are one way of doing this, providing insights not available to ANT. But within ritual approaches there is, I argued, a fundamental choice between deconstructive and reconstructive (or neo-Durkheimian) approaches. I will argue in conclusion for the political value today of that deconstructive approach.

First, however, and in the spirit of making transparent the theoretical choices involved, I want to explore some philosophical underpinnings of this deconstruction. While my approach to media rituals seeks to dismantle certain discourses about 'the social' and society – most obviously, functionalist discourses in the Parsonian or neo-Durkheimian tradition – **surely there are** languages of the social that we need to keep intact? Of the various deconstructions of 'the social' and 'society' on offer in contemporary theory (from Latour to Laclau to Bhaskar), which are more useful and which are less useful?

My previous critique of the 'myth of the (mediated) centre' (Couldry 2003a, 2006) was inspired initially by Edward Said, but it shares something important with Laclau and Mouffe's broader notion of hegemony whereby 'a particular social force assumes the

representation of a totality that is radically incommensurable with it' (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: x).[4] What Laclau and Mouffe mean by 'contaminated universality' – a consistent confusion of the particular for the universal (2001: xiii) – is very similar to what I meant to capture by the notion of 'myth'. Media are particular institutions that benefit from a specific concentration of symbolic resources, even if one that is huge in scale: yet they represent their role as a relationship to/for a totality ('society', 'the nation', and so on). Media discourse is always contaminated by such claims to the universal (so too is government discourse, which incessantly speaks for the totality of the nation). Whatever the real pressures that exist towards centralization in contemporary societies, the idea that such totalizing rhetorics are **fully** explained, let alone made 'functional', by a particular centre of value is a delusion: as Laclau and Mouffe write, 'the mere idea of a centre of the social has no meaning at all' (2001: 139)). I call this delusion 'the myth of the centre', onto which media build their own myth of privileged access to that centre ('the myth of the mediated centre'). And yet precisely such a myth was installed in the structural functionalism of Edward Shils (1975) and others in the mid 1970s and can be traced even today in discourse about media's relation to society.

Laclau and Mouffe's deconstruction of hegemony and universality seems even more useful for analysing media rituals and media power when we notice its historical dimension. As Laclau puts it in a passage I quote at the start of *Media Rituals* : '[contemporary societies] are required by their very dynamics to become increasingly mythical' (1990: 67). The same point is made at greater length by Laclau and Mouffe elsewhere:

> advanced industrial societies . . . are constituted around a fundamental asymmetry . . . the asymmetry existing between a growing proliferation of differences – a surplus of meaning of "the social" - and the difficulties encountered by any discourse attempting to fix those differences as moments of a stable articulatory structure. (2001: 96)

Laclau and Mouffe surely capture something here that helps explain the stampede by media industries in the past decade towards the apparently tautological aim of re-presenting to audiences their 'ordinary' 'reality'.

The more closely however I look at Laclau and Mouffe's broader arguments about politics and 'society', the more uneasy I become. Any possibility of class-based identities is dismissed, not on grounds of historical contingency but absolutely because it is only a 'naturalist prejudice' that the economic underlies the cultural (2001: 67). 'Unfixity', we are told 'has become the condition of every social identity', yet myths of society are deluded because they 'suture' an 'original lack'; that lack, it seems, is endemic to the social itself - 'there is no sutured space peculiar to "society", since the social itself has no essence'(2001: 85, 88n1, 96, added emphases). At work here in Laclau and Mouffe's argument is an absolutism of denial (an inverted universalism) which we should question. First, because it undermines their historical insight into the increasingly mythical nature

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[4] Thanks to Mark Hobart for suggesting that I look more closely at the parallels between my position and Laclau and Mouffe's.

of contemporary societies; for if the mythical nature of discourse about 'society' derives from the absolute gap between any discourse and what they call the 'field of discursivity', then it is difficult to see how contemporary societies can be any more mythical than all those that preceded them.[5] And, second, because if 'the social has no essence', then there is no stable basis for constituting a discipline around it. This is exactly the position of Latour, as we saw, yet the political aims and argumentative premises of Laclau and Mouffe seem very different. While Latour absolutely prioritises networks (in some sense) over things and people (or indeed representations), Laclau and Mouffe absolutely prioritise discourse (in some sense) over things or people. Laclau and Mouffe's prioritization of discourse entails that everything including 'the social' is subject to the conditions of discourse and in particular to one condition, discourse's 'openness' and non-totalizability. So Laclau and Mouffe tell us that the 'partial' character of articulation 'proceeds from the openness of the social, as a result, in its turn, of the constant overflowing of every discourse by the infinitude of the field of discursivity' and that objects cannot 'constitute themselves as objects outside any discursive conditions of emergence'; as a result, '"society" is not a valid object of discourse' (2001: 113, 108, 111, added emphasis).

Yet if the general terms 'society' and 'social' – and not just the value-loaded notion of a social 'centre' – are to be abandoned entirely, the idea of media research drawing on social theory is pure paradox, exactly as Latour would have us believe. At the very least, we are forced to make clear in what precise sense we draw on notions of 'society' and 'the social' when claiming that media research – whether on media rituals or anything else – might contribute something to 'social theory'. Here, I think, it is useful to draw on the 'critical realist' philosopher of science, Roy Bhaskar whose work,[6] for all its formidable difficulty of language, would seem to offer a nuanced position between Latour and Laclau, between postmodernism and crude positivism.

Very briefly, Bhaskar's ontological starting-point for the social sciences is that their subject-matter includes 'both social objects (including beliefs) and beliefs about those objects' (1989: 101). Bhaskar is concerned to defend the importance in the social world of interpretations without lapsing into constructionism, and of concepts without falling into a 'conceptual absolutization or reductionism (that concepts are not only necessary for, but exhaustive of, social life')' (1989: 185). Bhaskar rejects the absolutization of discourse on which Laclau and Mouffe's arguments precisely rely as 'the linguistic fallacy', 'the definition of being in terms of . . . language or discourse' (1989: 180). While Bhaskar's insistence that 'societies are real' (1989: 69) appears to be a naïve positivism, it is far from that. For Bhaskar rejects the prioritizing of either individuals or social groups in explanation – so ruling out both utilitarian liberalism and Durkheim's collectivist conception of society (1989: 73). The objects of social science for Bhaskar are above all 'the persistent relations between individuals (and groups) and . . . the relations between those relations' (1989: 71). While society exists, society is not for

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[5] Butler makes a similar criticism directly of Derrida (1997: 150).
[6] Bhaskar has generally been neglected in media research, so far as I can tell. For a rare discussion, see Deacon et al (1999).

Bhaskar a simple functional totality, but 'a complex totality', 'an ensemble of structures, practices and conventions that individuals reproduce or transform' (1989: 78, 76).

What matters here is that Bhaskar insists on the 'causal irreducibility of social forms in the genesis of human action' (1989: 91). And so, I suggest, should we - painful though it is to declare one's ontological commitments at such a high level of abstraction! The alternatives at the level of ontology - Latour's associationism (which runs the risk of turning into a strange vitalism of connections) and Laclau and Mouffe's discursivism – are hardly satisfactory. Nor is there any contradiction between a deconstructive spirit towards media rituals and a critical realism as advocated by Bhaskar. On the contrary, it is difficult to see what other philosophical framework could provide the friction that a genuinely critical and deconstructive project needs.

Conclusion

We have never needed that deconstructive project more than now. We live in an intensely connected global mediaspace where media's capacity to saturate everyday life is greater than ever. Elements of decentralization – the decentring of some transnational media flows, the intensified competition faced by national media sources – only make media spectacle a more important resource for all media actors, both political and non-political. Add in a conflict-ridden global politics and we can expect the resources of mediated ritualisation to be continually drawn upon by political, corporate and other actors, producing dangerous exclusions within the sphere of visibility (Butler 2004). There is something political at stake in achieving a <u>theoretical</u> grasp of how large-scale media forms work and aspire to the status of naturalized social forms.

The Retort Collective (2005) have recently argued that political power is inseparable from media (symbolic) power in a world of spectacle far more dangerous than Guy Debord ever envisaged (see also Giroux 2006). If so, it follows that any challenge to political power must involve contesting <u>media power</u>: that is, (following both ANT and ritualisation theory) questioning not just media's institutional power but our whole way of organizing life and thought around and through media. (Here online resources will surely be crucial longer-term, whatever the dangers of believing the myths that currently circulate about the Internet.)

The Retort Collective from outside media research - they are sociologists, geographers, historians – set two very different challenges for media research. First, alongside giving attention to the major media spectacles of our time, we must analyse also the countless practices of 'mediation' that fall <u>outside</u> media's dominant flows and rhetorics, which silently challenge them by heading in a different direction and on a different scale: hence the importance of the expanding research into alternative media. Rejecting totalities means analysing new and different <u>particularities</u> and in sites beyond, or obscured by, the scope of those rhetorics.

A different challenge, implicit in the first, is to maintain, in the face of media's universalising 'panoramas' a deconstructive intent and a continual suspicion. It is of

course tempting to argue – witness Simon Cottle's (2006) recent attempt to save media rituals from what he calls 'neo-Marxian' political critique - that, even if media events or rituals are social constructions, they are none the worse for that: what society can live without myths? Surely we should bracket out our usual questions (what type of myths? whose myths? myths constructed on what terms?), because, in the end, we have no choice but to accept media's role in focussing our world's mythical production? The 'end of history', perhaps, for critical media research? There is a pragmatic weight to such arguments yet it is vital we resist such temptation. For it invites us, adapting Søren Kierkegaard,[7] to make the one error that, as media researchers, we had a chance of avoiding.

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[7] Søren Kierkegaard wrote (1958: 167): 'Not to venture is shrewd. And yet, by not venturing, it is so dreadfully easy to lose that which it would be difficult to lose in even the most venturesome venture, and in any case never so easily, so completely as if it were nothing . . . one's self'. Compare the unreferenced quotation from Kafka in Laing (1971: 78): 'you can hold yourself back from the sufferings of the world . . . but perhaps precisely this holding back is the only suffering that you might be able to avoid'. Kierkegaard and Kafka are writing about the individual self, but their logic is surely transposable to collective enterprises such as research.

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